

MBUK WRECKED & RATED

Bike Test

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS

£1,200-£1,600



THE LINE-UP



KINESIS DECADE
VIRSA X5 **£1,199**



NINER EMD 9 1-STAR
£1,399



SURLY KARATE
MONKEY OPS **£1,599.99**



ONZA PAYOFF
£1,600

Words Guy Kesteven Pics Russell Burton

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS

With football and fishing being the UK's number one spectator and participant sports, tackling the trails rather than watching tackles or dangling tackle in a pond already marks mountain bikers out as alternative thinkers. But some riders choose to separate themselves out even further by seeking a rare breeds bike – maybe because that brand identity chimes better with their own character or image, or in the hope that it'll deliver a different experience on the trail. Small companies producing low numbers of bikes can struggle to compete with bigger brands when it comes to cost. In many cases that premium pricing is even part of the appeal, adding extra exclusivity. But as our selection of bikes this month proves, not all offbeat brands charge a fortune. Do these hardtails still offer something genuinely different though, and are they worth buying? »



THE TESTER

Guy Kesteven

Whether it's a supermarket super-bargain or the most exotic upper-echelon hand-built frame, every bike our Kes and his northern wrecking crew tests gets the same exacting, exhaustive treatment on the toughest trails.

Bike Test

ALTERNATIVE HARDTAILS
£1,200-£1,600

WORTH THE WAIT

Onza have been working on the Payoff and Jackpot frames for two years and that shows in the innovative detailing and outstanding ride quality

BIG BROTHER

If you want more travel and mid-size wheels the Onza Jackpot uses a similar frame with 150mm Revelation fork and Reverb dropper post for £1,850

DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

The fat-axled Onza crankset maximises power delivery and the press-fit BB30 bottom bracket can be converted into a chain-tensioning singlespeed set-up

ONZA PAYOFF

£1,600

Sweetly detailed big-wheeled trail fun from reborn UK brand

SO GOOD

Outstandingly well balanced, trail blasting ride

Well thought out single-ring spec maximises big ride or big fun versatility

NO GOOD

Aggro riders might be better building up a slacker, grippier bike via Onza's custom programme

Narrow-range cassette is a killer on steep climbs

JARGON BUSTER

Narrow/wide ring

Single chainring that uses alternating thick and thin teeth for extra chain retention security.

Brazing

An old construction method where metal sections are joined with melted brass rather than welded.

If your ears pricked up at the mention of Onza then you've obviously been into biking for a while, but the new Payoff is a great mix of retro-referenced detail and totally modern trail bike with left field appeal at an affordable price.

The frame

Onza's own-brand 'Flawless' tubing is a retro choice designed to deliver a smooth ride without rear suspension. There's an impressive level of detailing right through the frame too. The tapered head tube backs onto the 35mm diameter down tube with extra support from an open-backed throat gusset. The bottom bracket is an oversize PF30 set-up – rare on a steel frame – and there's an eccentric insert in the pipeline to allow simple singlespeed chain adjustment.

The chainstays sprout from a big, forged wishbone bridge box. Their flat-to-round section adds a natural spring effect to the rear end while big, angular 3D dropouts hold replaceable axle inserts set up as 142x12mm as standard. The cantilevered post brake mount leads neatly into top tube routing. The 27.2mm seatpost diameter limits aftermarket dropper

post choice but the long-levered QR clamp is easy to open and close on the fly and the single-bend seat tube means you can drop the saddle right down even without hydraulic help.

Painted Payoff frames are electroplated internally to stop corrosion (raw finish 'Acid Bath' frames aren't) and at £379 are great value if you want to build up your own bike. You're limited to just 17 or 19in sizes but there's a 650b wheeled Jackpot version and the Payoff will take 2.8in 650b+ tyres too.

The kit

The Payoff's Shimano SLX baseline saves weight and slightly improves function and durability over the Deore kit found on other bikes here. Onza provide their own usefully stiff BB30 crankset with 32t narrow/wide ring for a clean and lightweight transmission. Thankfully there's a wider range cassette in the pipeline in case you haven't got the power and determination to grunt the bike up steep hills with its current 11-34t block.

The wheels and Kenda tyres are helpfully light and the RockShox Revelation fork is controlled enough on descents to make it worth earning the

vertical gain. Onza provide the finishing kit, including a well shaped 750mm bar and retro Ules grips. Onza also offer a full custom build programme so you can build your dream bike.

The ride

A dream build is definitely worth considering too, because the more we rode the Payoff, the more we appreciated just what a great frame this is for blasting typical UK trails. Larger diameter frame tubes and the box-backed PF30 bottom bracket mean it's definitely stiffer and easier to hustle up to speed than the Surly. The Slant Six tyres are very fast-rolling too, so once you've heaved it through the first few pedal strokes it accelerates with encouraging responsiveness. Add enthusiastic hop-and-pop responsiveness and we were surprised by how much time we spent at the flat-out end of the gears even on rollercoaster trails.

There's plenty of accurate, clearly communicated trail feedback coming through the grips and pedals but the carefully shaped back end keeps the frame just compliant enough for comfort and consistent connection. It's definitely smoother than an alloy

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SPENT AT THE FLAT-OUT END OF THE GEARS
EVEN ON ROLLERCOASTER TRAILS



bike over rocky sections, with less sting through your shoes and a spring-and-ping, rather than clatter-and-batter, response to impacts.

If you really want to push on, the tapered head tube will take a 140mm (5.5in) travel fork to slacken things up without pulling the bottom bracket too high or voiding the warranty. The steeper stock head angle does reduce the potential barge effect of the bigger wheels on tight trails though, and

makes the steering less floppy and fussy at slower speeds, particularly on climbs or when you're knackered at the end of an epic exploring day. A more aggressive handling set up would put more load through the relatively slippery front tyre and 120mm fork than they could comfortably handle too, and create a heavier, slower bike for tamer trails.

The Onza is still the most naturally rowdy, 'pop the front wheel, slide the

back end, launch that drop, make the most of every metre of trail' bike here by a big slice anyway and the frame-only and custom build options let you wring maximum potential out of this top-quality trail ripper. >>

MBUK

Excellent frame delivers tough, trail ready, steel-sprung fun at a cracking price



				
	SURLY KARATE MONKEY OPS	KINESIS DECADE VIRSA X5	NINER EMD 9 1-STAR	ONZA PAYOFF
PRICE	£1,599.99	£1,199	£1,399	£1,600
DISTRIBUTOR	www.ison-distribution.com	www.kinesisbikes.co.uk	www.jungleproducts.co.uk	www.onza.com
WEIGHT	13.61kg (30lb)	12.86kg (28.35lb)	13.04kg (28.75lb)	13.6kg (29.98lb)
FRAME	Surly Natch double-butt 4130 chromoly steel	Tange Prestige Japan double-butt chromoly steel	7005 aluminium alloy	Onza Flawless double-butt 4130 chromoly steel
SIZES	16, 18, 20 (tested), 22in	16, 18 (tested), 20in	XS, S, M, L (tested), XL	S, M, L (tested)
FORK	Fox 32 Float Evolution, 100mm (3.9in) travel	X-Fusion Sweep RL, 140mm (5.5in) travel	RockShox Recon Silver, 100mm (3.9in) travel	RockShox Revelation Solo Air, 120mm (4.7in) travel
HEADSET	Cane Creek 40	XX44	Internal	FSA internal
WHEELS	Hubs: Shimano Deore, 100x15mm F, 142x12mm R Rims: Alex XD-LITE Spokes: DT Swiss Champion, stainless Wheel weight: 2.25kg F, 2.85kg R (including tyres)	Hubs: Kinesis Maxlight IX Disc, 100x15mm F, 142x12mm R Rims: Kinesis Maxlight IX Spokes: Stainless Wheel weight: 1.96kg F, 2.55kg R (including tyres)	Hubs: Niner, 100x15mm F, QR R Rims: Niner Spokes: Stainless Wheel weight: 2.16kg F, 2.86kg R (including tyres)	Hubs: Weinmann XC180 Disc, 100x15mm F, 142x12mm R Rims: Weinmann XC180 Disc Spokes: Stainless Wheel weight: 2.06kg F, 2.67kg R (including tyres)
TYRES	Maxxis Ardent 29x2.4in	Continental Mountain King 27.5x2.2in	WTB Nine Line TCS 29x2.0in	Kenda Slant Six DTC 29x2.35in
CRANKSET/BOTTOM BRACKET	Shimano Deore M615, 24/38t/BB70	SRAM X5, 26/39t/GXP	Shimano Deore M615, 24/38t/BB70	Onza 1, 32t/PF30
DERAILLEURS	Shimano Deore M615	SRAM X5	Shimano Deore M615	Shimano SLX R
SHIFTERS	Shimano Deore M615 (2x10)	SRAM X5 (2x10)	Shimano Deore M615 (2x10)	Shimano SLX R (1x10)
CASSETTE/CHAIN	Shimano HG50, 11-36t/Shimano HG54	SRAM PG-1030/KMC X10	Shimano HG50, 11-36t/Shimano HG54	Shimano HG81, 11-34t/Shimano HG81
BRAKES	Shimano Deore M615, 180/160mm rotors	Tektro Draco 2, 180/160mm	Shimano Deore M447 180/160mm	Shimano Deore M447, 180/160mm
BAR/STEM/GRIPS	Salsa Salt Flat, 750mm/Surly HL, 90mm/lock-on	Kinesis Strut, 750mm/FSA OS-190, 90mm/WTB WeirWolf	Niner Flat Top Alloy, 710mm/Niner Alloy, 90mm/Niner Grrrips	Onza, 750mm/Onza, 80mm/Onza Ules lock-on
SADDLE/	Kalloy SP-342/Velo VL-2155	FSA SL-280/WTB Volt Sport	Niner alloy/Niner custom	Onza/fi'zi:k Gobi
DIMENSIONS				
FRAME ANGLES	Head 72° Seat 73°	Head 67.5° Seat 69°	Head 72° Seat 74°	Head 69° Seat 73°
VERDICT	MBUK ★★★★★ Super-smooth steel-framed cruiser made for long-haul exploring, not high-speed hammering	MBUK ★★★★★ Lively, effervescent, conventional angled XC frame at a great price, but complete bike is less convincing	MBUK ★★★★★ Really well balanced cross-country/race 29er with a real premium feel at a surprisingly affordable price	MBUK ★★★★★ Excellent frame delivers tough, trail ready, steel-sprung fun at a cracking price

WHAT OUR SCORES MEAN: We give each bike one overall score to sum up how it performs and its value for money. If a bike gets a score of five, it really is the best you can get in terms of both

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Poor: simply put, don't bother

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Below average: flawed in some way

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Good: it'll do the job and do it well

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Very good: one of the best you can buy

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Exceptional: a genuine class leader



FINAL VERDICT

There are various reasons for companies to offer complete bikes based on successful frames. These range from import tax breaks to just trying to make things convenient for customers, and it's been a successful move for boutique brands such as Santa Cruz, Intense and Nicolai. Our test shows that it's not as simple getting that complete bike right as you might think though.

Unfortunately the Kinesis is the most obvious example of that here. Even if you ignore the fact that the 140mm fork is overkill for the frame and the geometry, the budget SRAM X5 gearing, poor brakes and other parts undermine a potentially great short-travel steel XC frame.

Surly have done a much better job, equipping the Karate Monkey

with kit that supports its super-smooth and steady character. If distance, not dynamic, riding is your bag, then it's definitely worth a look.

If covering distance fast – or just blasting flat out – is more your thing, then Niner's EMD 9 shows how to put a pretty yet practical package together to get the best from a good frame.

The frame is the most important part of any bike, and in this case the Onza is the clear winner in terms of neat detailing and outstanding ride quality that injects solid drive, forgiving control and spring-heeled enthusiasm into every ride. Add a better than average, versatility expanding build, plus well priced frame-only or custom build options, and the Payoff was the unanimous test team favourite.

NEXT MONTH

Affordable hardtails

Best bikes for £600 **ON SALE 13 NOVEMBER**